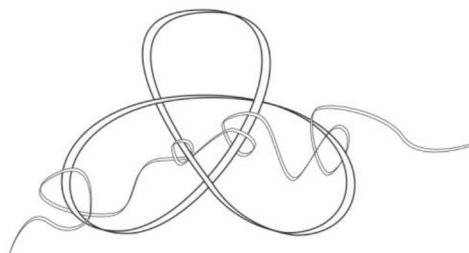## SPECIAL SECTION

Anthropological knots

Conditions of possibilities and interventions

Sarah GREEN, *University of Helsinki*

This paper outlines how the *Anthropological Knots* debate covered in this special section was framed, and offers its own threads for approaching the two questions addressed by it: First, what is it that makes anthropology possible in the contemporary moment? And second, what might count as intervention in anthropological terms? The paper argues that an ethnographic focus is essential to answering both questions. Such a focus is implicitly conceptually comparative, and generates a simultaneous sense that there are no guaranteed understandings which always already hold across space or time; but it also implies that the diversity, endless and complex as it may be, is not random: there are always particularities that make a difference, and which have specific implications for intervention. So while *Anthropological Knots* generates a sense of endless entanglement, these are crucially historically and socially framed entanglements, both conceptually and in practice.[1]

Keywords: anthropology, ethnography, intervention, knots, agency, double binds

Editor's note: This special section is based on a symposium held at the University of Helsinki on January 15, 2014. Video excerpts of that event can be viewed on the Allegra website at:: http://allegralaboratory.net/anthropological-knots-symposium-the-videos/.

Introduction

The *Anthropological Knots* project aims to respond to two questions. First, what is it that makes anthropology possible in the contemporary period? The discipline emerged during a very different historical moment, and changes within the academic institutional heartlands of anthropology (i.e., the Euro-American intellectual, geopolitical, and economic spheres) have radically shifted the conditions of anthropology's possibility. Second, what might count as intervention in anthropological terms? The latter question is aimed at thinking about anthropological engagement within the world of which anthropology is a part—not so much in terms of the activism of particular anthropologists, but more in terms of the political implications of different ways of thinking anthropologically. Setting up the debate in this way is intended to ensure a focus on the constant, mutually constitutive, entanglement between various anthropologies, ethnographies, and the historical dynamics which simultaneously reflect and help to create them.

This focus on entanglement, on the inability to ultimately unravel all the knots, keep things separate, or tie up the loose ends between both diverse anthropologies and the worlds and moments of which they are a part, is a key theme informing this special section. Of course, that there are no singular or encompassing answers (let alone definitions), and that approaches and understandings always proliferate the moment any attempt is made to describe them, is as banal an observation as the point that in order for anthropology to exist, the idea of describing relations (as opposed to simply enacting them) also needs to exist (Strathern, this volume). Still, there are different ways to deal with such banalities, and in this collection, the aim is to make explicit the implications, and to explore the potential, for anthropological intervention. Taken together, the collection does so through providing a set of entangled approaches and understandings, in which each example is a partial reiteration of the previous one, but also a departure (bifurcation, perhaps) and development. This is not simply intended to show how knots generate more knots (that would be banal indeed); rather, in focusing on possibilities and interventions, *Anthropological Knots* also aims to explore the limits and implications of various forms of knotting—of the *difference* it makes to create knots in one way rather than another, both to anthropology and to the worlds of which anthropology is an integral part.[1]

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1. I am leaving the meaning of difference deliberately unspecified here. An anonymous reviewer expressed her/his opinion that difference should be defined as "*variation . . .* the one fundamental lesson one should think structuralism had taught us" (emphasis original). This definitional approach toward concepts is not taken here. Indeed, one of the key points of *Anthropological Knots* is to explore the premise that any definition is inevitably an intervention (see Strathern, as well as Martin, this volume). This includes claims to any inherent (fixed) lack of fixity, of course—for example, claims that everything, including any difference, is constantly in flux (or in a state of continual variation, say), as often appears in scholarship influenced by Deleuze. In saying that all definitions of difference are also interventions, I am not making such a claim (which would require me to define what difference is, in order to establish what is constantly in flux). Rather, my interest is in the political implications of asserting that difference has one meaning rather than another; and I take that to be an ethnographic approach

So this special section has been structured as a series of different, but interwoven threads. First, there are some initial answers to the two questions that are provided by four main articles: three of them were written by Marilyn Strathern, David Graeber, and Chris Gregory. In a familiar academic format, each of these authors' articles has an individual commentator: Jeanette Edwards discusses Strathern's account of historical and ethnographic conceptual traces (threads) of two of anthropology's most important tropes: nature–society distinctions and self-scrutiny (also sometimes known as audit in contemporary times); Jane Cowan discusses Graeber's account of the rise of the professional-managerial class (PMC) within universities (also often thought to be the source of the audit explosion in contemporary times), which in his view has stifled the potential for anthropology to provide radical alternatives; and Joel Robbins discusses Gregory's account of the rise of cultural economy and posthumanism, and the dangers he believes that holds for the possibilities of intervention. The commentators vary in their levels of agreement with the main authors; but all redescribe each article, and in doing so, they make distinctive claims for the implications for intervention of each of them, and tie each article into additional threads of thought (to borrow from Edwards).

That generates two sets of entangled threads: those between the accounts provided by each of these three main authors, who each answer the two questions differently, and those between each of the main authors' accounts and their individual commentators. To these two threads, three additional ones are added. In the Colloquium for this special section, there is a fourth main article by Michael Carrithers, accompanied by a commentary from Niko Besnier. It stands apart from the other three as it does not take the commonly recognized format of a research article (although it is one), and despite focusing more on the production of ethnography than any of the other texts in the special section. As will be clear from Besnier's commentary when compared to my own reading of the piece outlined below, Carrithers' article divided opinions more sharply than any of the other contributions to this special issue. In one sense, this generates a different form of knot from the other articles, as it concerns how anthropological scholarly work is evaluated, which is a matter of form as much as content and technique. Since all three (form, content, and technique) were of key concern to Carrithers in his analysis of ethnographic writing, and he used all three in unusual ways to demonstrate his point, it is perhaps unsurprising that these same issues led to a difference of opinion about the piece amongst reviewers and commentators.

To be sure, the article does not follow some key scholarly conventions, and it achieves its intellectual objectives in unconventional ways. In particular, the article does not strictly follow the obligation to take account of contemporary debates on the topic at hand—in this case, debates within linguistic anthropology concerning how ethnographic communication works, as Besnier discusses in detail in his commentary (though it is also possible to argue that those debates were irrelevant to the point Carrithers was trying to make). Carrithers focuses on two ethnographic texts published some time ago: Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and experience: The*

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toward the question of meaning, rather than a definitional one. Difference does have meaning; it simply cannot be stated in advance what that meaning might be, or what are its implications.

religion of the Dinka (1961); and his own book, *The forest monks of Sri Lanka: An anthropological and historical study* (1983). Carrithers generates both entangled knots and deep separations between the moments when these texts were produced, along with the conceptual and scholarly conventions that were current at the time, and what has happened to these texts since their production and publication. In his own discussion, he maintains the conceptual conventions of the historical moment when these texts were generated, a performance that demonstrates how the historical conditions in which anthropology becomes possible do indeed shift rapidly. The piece also demonstrates that these shifts are not only conceptual, but also structural (e.g., the radical change in the market for books over the years) and institutional (e.g., the increasing requirement within Anglophone anthropology for ethnographic writing to generate dense abstraction beyond description, which was not nearly as explicit a requirement when these two texts were published).

Carrithers' piece, which combines texts, images, and texts that behave like images (or vice versa, depending on how you look at it; a commentary on the contemporary custom for academic presentations to be made up of Powerpoint slides), is a performance as well as an article. The effect is either jarring or refreshing, depending on how people engage with it. For Besnier, it was jarring, and provoked from him a reiteration of the value of contemporary Bakhtinian approaches toward communication, which he notes were absent in Carrithers' piece. From that contemporary conceptual vantage point, Besnier composed a finely crafted critique of Carrithers' use of terms such as dialogue, dialectic, irony, and intentionality, drawing on scholarship carried out within the last two decades on these issues, and pointing out that Carrithers' apparent endorsement of the idea that communication is a matter of authors having intentions that are often misunderstood by their receivers misrecognizes the deeply politically inflected and entangled world in which all communication is caught up. Not enough knots, Besnier says. My own response was rather different, even though I have nothing to disagree about in Besnier's account of the contributions made by Bakhtinian approaches toward communication. Rather, I created a different knot. I tied the story Carrithers tells to the historically located intellectual moment of the production of the two texts he discusses, which provoked a sense of the impossibility of doing anthropology at all (what Carrithers refers to as *aporia*, a classical Greek word meaning impasse, perplexity, mystification). That, I felt, was Carrithers' deliberately playful answer to the question "What is it that makes anthropology possible in the contemporary moment?" His implication is that it is not possible, for every moment that passes, and every distance traveled (conceptually as well as spatially) alters the conditions of its possibility. And yet, anthropology is done anyway, and often with some rather beautiful results.

Besnier's concern with the deeply politically inflected conditions in which anthropologists offer conceptual understandings is, from yet another vantage point, at the heart of Keir Martin's article, which adds to these other three sets of threads (the three first articles and their partial reiteration, followed by Carrithers' piece and its partial reiteration). Martin addresses the two questions (what makes anthropology possible and what might anthropological intervention mean) through taking the accounts of all four main authors and tying them into a different knot. This generates another entangled thread about what anthropological intervention might

mean. Drawing on Wagner, Martin begins with an account of how conceptual similarities—for example, between anthropologists' and NGO workers' understandings of audit (self-scrutiny, in Strathern's terms)—can lead to distinctly different outcomes for the peoples who are the subjects of the anthropologist's gaze, on the one hand, and the NGO worker's gaze, on the other hand. Having established through this observation that his interest lies in how concepts differently work in practice within the power-inflected worlds in which people live, Martin goes on to tug on one particular thread, or conceptual trope: the posthumanism of actor-network theory (ANT) particularly discussed by Gregory, but also mentioned in passing by Graeber (both in this volume). He does this through a critique of Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the social* (2005), taking that text as one, quite central, example of the playing out of the implications for intervention of a posthumanist/ANT position. Having done that, he then draws out these implications even further by bringing them into relation with the earlier *anti*humanism of Louis Althusser. Although the two have distinctly contrasting conceptual and political approaches (Althusser's approach being radically structurally determinist and Latour's being radically anti- or postdeterminist), Martin suggests that one of the outcomes—the denial of a humanist account of the world—is much the same in both cases. Read alongside Gregory, who is particularly concerned about the insistence on unpredictability within much posthumanist thought (everything exists in an endless swirl of assemblages and reassemblages), Martin's drawing of a conceptual parallel with one of the most structured and determinist of accounts (i.e., Althusser's) is another demonstration of the knottiness of the question of intervention: one can reach the same point from diametrically opposed directions.

In effect, Martin argues that any conceptual approach which either narrows the possibility for people to do something that has a reasonable chance of making a difference, and/or provides few tools for making the actions of powerful people visible, is probably not a good conceptual approach to take for intervention purposes. Agreement with this proposition of course depends upon how "politics" is understood (e.g., as creative reassemblage, or as resistance, or as the inevitable outcome of any statement about how the world is). In any case, it is a plea, also seen variously in Gregory and Graeber (this volume), for people to wake up and smell the coffee: for being actively and consciously aware that taking on certain conceptual approaches entangles one with other things in particular ways (depending on the time and place), and that has consequences for what intervention might mean. While this point of course embeds within it a particular understanding of politics, and is therefore another partial account (Strathern 2004), the more interesting implication, for the purposes of this special section, is not whether there is a correct way to understand the answers to the questions posed for *Anthropological Knots*; rather, it is the means used by Martin—and, indeed, all the other authors in this special section—to explore a range of possible answers. I would call these means one or other form of ethnographic focus. Such a focus is implicitly comparative, and generates a simultaneous sense that there are no guaranteed understandings which always already hold across space and time; but it also implies that this diversity, endless and complex as it may be, is not random: there are always particularities that make a difference, and which have specific implications for intervention.

This is a key point for my own contribution of an entangled thread tied into this special section: the idea that it is never enough, anthropologically speaking, to note that differences exist and proliferate, and become more complex, the more you look at them; the *particular* difference made (in both space and time) should also be taken into account if intervention is to be understood, whether conceptually or in practice. The remainder of this introduction aims to draw out a few more threads of what that might mean.

Entangled knots

As a metaphor, knots have popped up a lot in the last few years. In 2013, the Leverhulme Trust even put out a research grant topic call entitled "The Nature of Knots."[2] That call focused on the interconnectedness implied by knots, both in mathematics and in Nature (*sic*), and it appealed to applicants to provide ideas for "Innovations for Sustainable Living," suggesting that "there is a widespread realization that humans will have to find new ways of living, in order to avoid environmental degradation and social disorder" (see note 2). Within anthropology, Tim Ingold has also increasingly taken this interconnectedness approach toward knots, first raising the issue in depth in *Lines* (2007), and most recently developing the concept to be used in the understanding of architecture and landscape: "In a world where things are continually coming into being through processes of growth and movement—that is, in a world of life—knotting, I contend, is the fundamental principle of coherence. It is the way forms are held together and kept in place within what would otherwise be a formless and inchoate flux."[3]

I have evoked the metaphor somewhat differently here, even though it is hard to disagree with Ingold's conclusion to *Lines* that "drawn threads invariably leave trailing ends that will . . . be drawn into other knots with other threads" (ibid.: 186). The difference concerns what is being knotted and what the implications of such knotting might be. While Ingold is centrally interested in what he calls the "meshwork" (rather than network) of interwoven relations between people and other living entities, places, things, and movement, I have been concerned with some of the more troublesome (less smooth) implications of the metaphor of knots—entanglement and double binds that come together and get caught up with each other.[4] And

2. See: http://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/files/seealsodocs/1300/Programme%20topics%20 2013.PDF (last accessed December 18, 2014).

3. http://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/seminars/ (last accessed December 18, 2014), Research Seminar entitled "Of knots and blocks: Dwelling in smooth space." I am grateful to Joel Robbins for pointing this out to me.

4. While this idea of knots evokes some of the same sensibility of distorted, extended, or twisted sets of relations as has at times been evoked through the concept of topology (and see note 3 for an example of this type of "extended" use), I have chosen knots as a more appropriate metaphor than topologies because topology evokes a more encompassing spatial concept, eliciting analogies such as a "rubber sheet" (Leach 1961: 7–8), a crushed handkerchief (Serres and Latour 1995: 60), folds (Deleuze 1993), and so on. Topologies imply a certain understanding of space, scale, and its distortions with an

perhaps most importantly, the starting point of *historically* located entanglement is an important distinction between the concerns of Ingold[5] and the focus of this special section overall. Past episodes of entanglements, in this case particularly anthropology's entanglements, leave specific traces, or threads, both of thought and of practice, that are worth picking up and tugging at to explore their implications, to try to understand what form of intervention they constitute.

In this, the separations of the different threads as well as their mutual involvement are of equal interest: the tensions, paradoxes, double binds, and sheer material and political inequalities that are exercised when differences become entangled with one another form a key focus. Here, my own interest in the difference that difference makes (to borrow from Bateson 1972: 453) is focused firmly on ethnographically informed differences—the differences that are evoked, expressed, or generated through encounters, crossings, and entanglements: what appear as, are thought to be, or are acted upon as differences. There is no single meaning to difference; it is established afresh ethnographically, in each encounter (cf. note 1 above).

At the same time, and this is a point made by Strathern in her contribution, there are also knotty issues that arise when *similarities* encounter one another. For example: If the logic informing anthropological self-reflection is conceptually the same as the logic informing the incessant auditing that bedevils the lives of most academics these days, then how can anthropologists say they are doing something other than what policy makers are doing in their interventions? As mentioned earlier, this question troubles Martin: despite the logical similarities, there is, he argues, a difference in the *content* of policy makers' and anthropologists' descriptions. To Martin, that difference in the two kinds of description (ethnographic and policy-oriented) is more important than the epistemological similarities, the fact that they have the same intellectual histories. In making that point, Martin is also, and simultaneously, demonstrating Strathern's main argument in her paper, which is that description is always also an intervention; in this case, whether your description emphasizes similarity (Strathern) or difference (Martin) will affect the form of intervention made.

Double binds

That type of doubling up, in which something is simultaneously its opposite, or becomes somehow ensnared in its opposite, leads me on to a characteristic of knots that holds considerable resonance for the majority of contributions to *Anthropological Knots*: the concept of the double bind. It is Chris Gregory who explicitly introduces the concept, noting that Gregory Bateson coined the term, along with a team

emphasis on inevitable interrelations, whereas the metaphor of knots is intended to imply something less encompassing, more frayed at the edges, more than only spatial and less entirely interconnected. For an intriguing critique of ANT's use of the concept of topologies and an extension of the concept of power geometries using topological logic, see Allen (2011).

5.   As well as some other variations of an interest in phenomenological/ontological approaches (e.g., Holbraad 2012; Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen, and Holbraad 2014).

of colleagues in Palo Alto, in the course of their work on schizophrenia (Bateson et al. 1956; Bateson 1972). Gregory recounts a classic double-bind scenario described by Bateson in which a Zen Buddhist master, in Gregory's words, "holds a stick over the head of the student and says, 'If you say this stick is real, I will strike you with it; if you say it is not real, I will strike you with it; if you say nothing, I will strike you with it.' A student can escape the double bind by reaching up and taking the master's stick away" (Gregory, this volume, citing Bateson et al. 1956: 254).

Gregory uses this image to suggest that Latour sets up precisely this kind of double bind in his critique of humanism: whatever humanist critical sociologists do to defend themselves against Latour's accusation, they will prove Latour right. The only way out, Gregory suggests, is to refuse to engage with the question, and instead develop an argument that effectively takes the stick away.

There are other examples of double binds in the contributions, and I have already mentioned some of them, including: ethnographic description is always already an intervention, and it has a history of skewed double vision (Strathern); from the start, anthropology's key premises make practicing it impossible, but somehow it is practiced anyway (Carrithers); and, which I have not yet mentioned, the process of constant self-critique and denial of self-privilege has also been the means to achieve academic privilege (Graeber). All of these doublings point to an issue dealt with in most intricate historical and ethnographic detail by Strathern in this special section, in her analysis of self-scrutiny. Drawing on Hoskin's work on eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy, as well as Lea's ethnographic description of bureaucratic auditing involved in providing Australian Aboriginals with medical services, Strathern draws out the connecting threads between these and contemporary anthropologists' constant self-scrutiny. Anthropological scholarship is replete with critiques of ethnocentric assumptions, reification, neocolonialist sentiments, textual tricks that made it look like description is factual, and dichotomization (especially in the areas of sex and gender, nature and culture, and mind and body, which in practice covers just about everything). Attempts at finding a way out of being caught in the double bind of simultaneously being obliged to write ethnography that is free of presumptions while knowing that this is impossible have included: thinking through some kind of temporary compromise, delivered with an accompanying apology for falling short (which is personified in Graeber's paper here in the image of the frightened, self-critical academic); or developing an acutely critical style in which everyone else's work is examined for its shortfalls—which appears, on the one hand, in Carrithers' contribution as *over*theorizing with no ethnographic content; and, on the other hand, in Robbins' comments as *under*theorizing while hanging descriptions on to locations such as "global" or "transnational."[6]

It is worth briefly expanding the point that Robbins makes. His overall commentary on Gregory's paper also explores a different double bind: that anthropology used to be much more central to the humanities and social sciences (i.e., in a better position to intervene) when anthropologists spoke of wholes rather than

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6. I myself describe a sense of being caught in such a double bind in my study of the Greek–Albanian border region, but I also immediately took the stick away, shifting the parameters, and left the double bind unresolved because that is the only way out of double binds (Green 2005: 12).

networks and fragments, and when they described the world positively rather than equivocally. Although self-scrutiny led to the collapse of holism (rightly, in Robbins' view), what was lost when anthropology lost holism was what Robbins calls theory: the ability to identify causation from ethnographic material. Holism was anthropology's invisible hand—and that was both the beauty and the problem with it: when looked at closely, anthropologists concluded that "there is no there there," to quote Gertrude Stein (1937: ch. 4), who was describing what had happened to Oakland, California, since she had been living there as a child—it was no longer there. Reading Robbins and Gregory together, one could conclude that ever since anthropology's holistic object fragmented into pieces, it seems as though theory has lost its moorings, holding on to some bit of the flotsam and jetsam that is no longer attached to any of the other parts, but instead describes things from locations, from the vantage point of that one fragment. That, says Robbins, is not theory; to say it is would be like an astronomer saying that their theory is Mars. Here, the echoes of standpoint theory, which covered much of the same ground concerning what can be comprehended from fragmented and discrete vantage points, and the disadvantages of making what appeared to be ontological claims about such different locations, come to mind (Harding 2004). This is one of the important reasons for exploring the theme of entanglement and knots: it may not be necessary to retain classical holism in order to develop coherent conceptual accounts; it might be enough to consider partial entanglements.

The conclusion I have drawn from this, which takes a different twist from the argument made by Graeber, is that the double-bind aspect of anthropological knots, painful as it is in practice, has been quite effective in creating spaces in which ideas can flourish. This is irrespective of whether those ideas are revisions of ones that have been tried before (most often the case), or apparently radical ones that attract as many noisy critics as they do noisy supporters. At least there is noise, and that provides a means to think differently, which to my mind is axiomatically part of any form of intervention. All that is needed is to provoke a thought, and, most often, to provoke the sense of the existence of a gap out of the articulation, or engagement, between the threads. This is part of what an ethnographic focus can provide.

Double binds can of course be destructive as well as constructive, and this is especially apparent where double binds have more serious consequences for people's lives than the debates anthropologists have amongst themselves about how to think and describe. Here, the implications of intervention become proportionately larger.[7] An illustration comes from the different interpretations of the work of W. H. R. Rivers, who was not only an anthropologist, but also a psychologist, and centrally involved in treating British soldiers who had developed hysterical symptoms (a particular form of double bind) as a result of their experiences in the First World War. This part of Rivers' life was subsequently made famous by Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* (1992), which concerned Rivers' relationship with his most famous

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7.   Disproportionate conditions can in themselves generate double binds. See Corsín Jiménez (2008) for an excellent discussion of the concept of proportion in relation to the production of academic knowledge in the current period. He describes the sense of "disproportion" in academic life as "the abyss that opened between institutional demands and personal conditions and possibilities for action" (ibid.: 238).

patient, Siegfried Sassoon, who had publicly denounced the war. Barker's novel focuses on the moral minefield Rivers tries to negotiate in treating soldiers who were seriously mentally harmed by the war, just so that they could be returned to the conditions that made them ill. This double bind was starkly presented to him through his treatment of Sassoon, which exposed him to the latter's alternative, and very negative, description of the meaning of the war.

Barker's novel is written in terms of the double bind that Rivers faced, but there are other ways to describe his involvement in treating these soldiers, and one of them has been written by the feminist historian and literary scholar Elaine Showalter. Showalter's description provides a provocative analogy of how some of the current attempts at taking away the master's stick within anthropology might involve entanglements in unanticipated ways. In *The female malady* (1995), Showalter argues that the understanding and treatment of hysteria in England during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was informed by assumptions about the fixed character of gender difference, which both generated the social conditions in which women would regularly become hysterical, and also defined the (highly sexualized) conditions under which women would be treated for that condition.[8] Showalter then discusses the moment when a rupture occurred in that assumption of gender difference, and this is where Rivers' story comes in. The widespread assumption within British psychiatry that physiological differences between men and women generated female forms of madness (hysteria) was confronted by an uncomfortable new phenomenon: male hysteria on a massive scale, seen in men returning from the front during the First World War. The condition was quickly labeled "shell shock," after being wrongly associated with the physical effects of men being too close to exploding bomb shells. When it became clear that some men displayed the symptoms even if they had been nowhere near exploding bombs, it was put down to some other kind of physiological weakness on the part of the sufferers (ibid.: 167–70). Over time, the scale of the problem became so large that the majority of people treating the soldiers (including Rivers) revised their view, and concluded that "shell shock," which showed symptoms identical to hysteria in women, was a psychological response to traumatic conditions in the trenches.

Rivers, who practiced as a psychologist during the war after his Torres Straits expedition, was, Showalter suggests, one of the most enlightened of the psychologists treating shell shock sufferers, and was amongst the first to conclude that the problem was psychological trauma. However, even Rivers believed that the men who fell ill with this condition were somehow more feminine (i.e., weaker) than those who did not. He also believed that the enlisted men would be more vulnerable than the commissioned officers, on the grounds that the officers had a "more complex mental life" than the enlisted men, who had proportionately much lower levels of education (ibid.: 174–75). This difference also explained, in Rivers' view, the difference in symptoms between the enlisted men and the officers: whereas

8. I could also have used an ethnographic example such as Jeffrey Clark's study of "madness" amongst the Wiru during a period of colonial control in the Pangia district of Papua New Guinea (Clark 1992); but that was analyzed as a straightforward case of resistance against the imposition of colonial rule. Showalter's account provides a somewhat more entangled story.

the enlisted men might find themselves unable to move a limb even if in physical terms there was nothing wrong with it, or they became mute, the officers tended to have mental breakdowns, nightmares, or hear voices. For Rivers, a difference in the mental strength and complexity of different soldiers (an assumed inherent difference, one might say) explained the variation.

Showalter has an alternative understanding, and therefore provides a different potential intervention. She notes that the enlisted soldiers were under the control of their officers and were the ones who were being shot at, with no possibility of escape. (If they tried to flee, they would be shot by their own officers for deserting.) On the other hand, the officers were the ones who had to order the enlisted men to go to their deaths, or to shoot them if they ran away. Showalter argues that the difference in the officers' and enlisted men's situations, and the completely different levels of control and responsibility over the options available, was much more likely to explain the difference in symptoms of trauma between them. In short, Showalter suggests that a combination of social hierarchy, structural power (the enlisted soldiers were not permitted any control over their situation), gender ideology, and a practical situation that delivers a life-threatening double bind would lead almost any human being who is placed in the same position as many women found themselves at that time in the United Kingdom (i.e., a position of both utter dependence and an inability to escape from an intolerable situation) to react with hysterical symptoms. Rivers, in contrast, argued that differences between what he believed to be fundamental masculine and feminine characteristics in individuals (not to mention diversity in class and levels of education) would determine responses to stress. For Showalter, a combination of socially and structurally imposed differences between people determined how they responded to double binds; for Rivers, the causes were determined less by social, ideological, or historical factors, and more by characteristics of the individuals involved. This is a powerful example of how differences in description constitute different interventions that can also be enacted as such. It is also an example of what I have referred to as an ethnographic focus: although Rivers was a trained anthropologist and Showalter was not, both drew upon an ethnographic sensibility in describing the situation, though with very different implications. In some senses, Showalter had a more extensive ethnographic focus than Rivers, in that she did not assume that masculinity and femininity had any inherent characteristics, but believed instead that they were socially and historically differently constituted. The imperative for self-scrutiny in anthropology that has intensified over the last three decades, and that Strathern historically traces in conceptual terms to the eighteenth century, has tended to regularly result in the identification of such unexamined assumptions about how things are, and leads to a strong sense of the need for yet more exploration using an ethnographic focus. And although there are some obvious down-sides to this endless self-scrutiny, especially when we are living through a period in which versions of this same concept and the imperative to apply it are reiterated in institutional audits whose intentions are indeed active intervention (of a neoliberal hue, in Graeber's view), it is important to distinguish between the act of self-scrutiny as such and the ideas (or ideologies) behind it in any given instance. As Martin argues, self-scrutiny with an ethnographic focus is different from other forms of self-scrutiny; and in my reading, Graeber's complaint against "post" theoretical approaches within anthropology, both in his

contribution to this special section and elsewhere (Graeber 2001), are based on his assertion that such approaches have turned away from an ethnographic focus and instead turned inward, investigating fellow anthropologists for coming up short, rather than carrying out detailed descriptions of peoples' lives from around the world. The conclusion I would draw from this is that self-scrutiny does not inherently possess particular characteristics, and particularly not any inherent moral characteristics—a point also made by Donna Haraway (1985) many years ago in her analysis of cyborg technologies: it depends on how their threads become entangled with other things.

Action and agency: Making things happen

That issue of how threads become mutually entangled, especially in the context of asking what anthropological intervention might be, inevitably leads to questions of agency. Here, Gregory's critique of the radical uncertainty advocated by posthumanism brought to mind Hannah Arendt's *The human condition* (1958). Arendt's approach toward human action, webs of relations, and the unpredictability of outcomes particularly kept coming back to me, not because of their similarity to the work of the likes of Frank Knight and Michel Callon discussed by Gregory, but because, once again, of their very different implications for intervention.

Briefly, Arendt had a central concern with action, agency, and the inherent unpredictability of outcomes. For her, politics is human action (almost always involving speech, but not only; ibid.: 178), and actions are not events with specific authors, but are instead constantly ongoing. This is because, she argued, people are embedded within "webs of relations" (ibid.: 184), which means that anything a person does will result in some engagement, response, or exchange—an entanglement, in my terms—that will itself be action. This endlessness of action also means that the *outcome* of action is both unpredicatable and lacking any single author. This is important: completely at variance with Adam Smith's "invisible hand," and also at variance with the concerns of many posthumanists as described by Gregory, what causes the uncertainty of outcomes (unpredictability is the word Arendt uses) is not the intervention of some spirit or thing, but human activity in the context of always being embedded within a dense web of relations. This means that no single action will determine the outcome, as our embedded relations with many other people ensure that their actions will intervene. Arendt explicitly distinguishes between an agent and an author here, and says that evidence of the exercise of agency can be seen in the outcome of actions (stories, Arendt calls such outcomes; ibid.), but because these outcomes cannot be traced back to any one individual, being the outcome of a dense web of actions and relations, there is no author for outcomes, there are only authors for actions. In other words: it is people who do things, but not any one of them can be called the author of the outcome. This is a humanist account of uncertainty, not a posthumanist account.

Arendt takes a poke at Adam Smith for suggesting that the lack of any single author in the outcome of market activity indicates the existence of an "invisible hand": he has mistaken a process (the story of the outcome) for something mysterious and invisible that has agency. Arendt comments: "The invisible actor behind

the scenes is an invention arising from a mental perplexity but corresponding to no real experience" (ibid.: 185). This is a critique of invisible hands as a reifying concept, which is again hardly new (indeed, Latour himself accuses critical sociology of reification; see Martin, this volume), but it adds to the suggestion by some more recent critics that a kind of mystical awe of forces that go beyond human capacities to understand them has been a mark of a number of forms of analysis or explanation in recent years. Gregory suggests that Latour, in particular, reintroduces spirituality into social theory, in part by accusing humanists of rejecting and failing to understand spirituality, a suggestion that Gregory argues is patently untrue. Gregory is of course not alone in detecting some kind of religiosity in some of the more recent approaches toward the question of agency. From a different perspective, Michael Scott (2013) suggests that the wonderment expressed in much of the writing that comes under the heading "ontological turn" is distinctly religious in character. Scott goes to some trouble to say that this is not necessarily a criticism of these new approaches; just that it should be noted. Gregory is rather more critical: the posthumanist approach, he suggests, detracts attention from the human causes of deep levels of inequality in today's world, and that has implications for intervention.

Apart from Gregory, whose aim is to explicitly address the question of agency in order to wrest it back from posthumanist disassembly so that it can be put firmly back into the hands of humans and their doings, all the other contributors also deal with this question in one way or another. Strathern suggests that the way in which relations are both understood (conceptually) and enacted (socially) plays a key part in how people encounter one another and attempt to have effects, and she provides some ethnographic examples of the threads and knots that result from such encounters. However, her main focus is on how relations became an object of description, which is part of her answer to the question of how anthropology became possible in the first place: if (social and conceptual) relations are at the heart of what anthropology does, then in order to understand what might constitute anthropological intervention, the way relations came to be describable must also be understood. Strathern speculates (drawing on Hoskin's work, mentioned above) that what made anthropology possible was conceptual logic that emerged during the Enlightenment, in which it made sense to describe things as objects of knowledge, whose character and essence could be better understood through better description. Strathern argues that this had a double effect: the first was to generate a separation between the one who describes and that which is being described—an issue that has caused endless debate in anthropology ever since; and the second was the implication that if you know a thing, then you can alter (improve) it. One could say the description itself is already an implicit intervention; but in addition, through the ideals and purpose of Enlightenment thought, description was also often intended to be a means to enact *explicit* intervention.

Here, Strathern argues that anthropology's special skill—the description of relations—developed as a part of that conceptual history. Her answer to the question of "how relations became an object of description, and thus of knowledge, too," which was key to the development of anthropology, is that it involved a separation between enactments of relating (i.e., being kin, such as being brothers-in-law) and the objectification of the concept of relations, as such: the concept became different

from the enactment (or its social existence), and, in that sense, spawned the possibility of description, and thus intervention.

Strathern implies that it is differences in concepts and enactment of *relations* that is the thread that interweaves through both the ethnographic examples she provides and Hoskin's account of eighteenth-century conceptual history. During the eighteenth century, as Enlightenment theory was being developed, it appears that a particular concept of relation also emerged: one of connection based on similarity (equal individuals) or difference (unequal individuals), as opposed to one based on kinship (meaning relations generated through preexisting social differences). And that is important, because connections understood in that new sense could be changed: "To solicit or deny a (social, kinship) connection was not to evoke a preexisting alterity, but to produce or create difference or sameness anew (either up or down). Every assertion of or denial of recognition was a social intervention" (Strathern, this volume).

Strathern immediately goes on to draw the conceptual parallel with epistemological description: "The same might be said, epistemologically speaking, of every interpretation or choice of descriptive language, or scientific investigation. Producing such a specific effect (the named, discovered, invented) mirrors back the producer's viewpoint." In short, and in contrast both to Arendt's existential humanism (where there is an agent but no author) and to the posthumanism that Gregory critiques (where there are many agents, meshed within a kind of distributed, networked, rhizomatic agency), Strathern suggests that authorship lies in the combined conceptualization and enactment of relations.

Jeanette Edwards, in her response to Strathern, concentrates both on the implicit moral imperative that developed with aspects of Enlightenment thought (especially self-scrutiny and the drive to "improve" things through that process), and on the way that Strathern refuses a straightforward inside and outside account of anthropology. Edwards draws out how Strathern's presentation could be seen as entirely in keeping with the *Anthropological Knots* aim of focusing on entanglement and mutual constitution, though, interestingly, she also takes the original description of *Anthropological Knots*, which used the word "context," to mean that the boundaries between inside and outside anthropology were being kept firmly separate, rather than entangled. Edwards draws attention to Dilley's critique of the concept of context (Dilley 1999), which provides an overview of the way the word ("context") has been associated with practices and meanings that narrow down the more entangled story that I thought I had implied by using the term "knots" in the title of this special section. That in turn ironically demonstrates the entanglement of any descriptions (and see Besnier's discussion of Carrithers): descriptions may be inevitable interventions, but they cannot intervene as they please.

Edwards also draws attention to recent work that shows quite how deeply the idea of contemporary *bureaucratic* self-scrutiny—that is, self-regulation through the concept of self as management—has penetrated in recent years. This points to the possibility that people themselves have begun to understand themselves as networks and assemblages, which implies that if people's everyday practical lives appear to share agency and authorship with things, so that many experience the world as an entanglement within powerful networks, it is understandable that some researchers might describe that in actor-network terms. Still, it would be

interesting to consider how that is different from a sense of entanglement within webs of kinship that has characterized most people's lives around the world for as long as relations have been the object of description, as it were: whether one is enmeshed in webs of social relations (as Arendt describes) or enmeshed in technically mediated networks (as Latour and Callon describe), the location of authorship, in Arendt's sense, seems a little difficult to disentangle. Gregory identifies the difference between the two as a humanist as against a posthumanist approach, which of course has deep implications for intervention: within a humanist approach, it is still people who create these webs, so it is they who can change them; within a posthumanist approach, that is much less clear.

Carrithers' contribution also reflects a concern over description that formed a key thread of Strathern's paper, but his focus is on the uncertainties involved in the process of ethnographic description, and all the entangled influences that come into both the production of the description and its subsequent interpretation. Where Strathern begins with the comment that description is already an intervention, Carrithers begins with the unpredictability of the form of intervention that the description constitutes, and therefore and therefore with the impossibility of foreseeing what might happen next. This takes a distinctly different slant on the question from Gregory's approach: where Gregory is concerned with the intellectual drive toward uncertainty in posthumanist thought, Carrithers is more concerned with the historical conceptual/philosophical moment in which the making of ethnographies is embedded, and how quickly that moment passes.

Carrithers' argument is what first triggered in me a memory of Arendt and her approach toward unpredictability. As I have already outlined, Arendt argues that unpredictability of outcomes is due to an "already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions," so that, "action almost never achieves its purpose" (1958: 184). In addition, actions are also unpredictable to Arendt because they never end (ibid.: 233). We can see stories unfolding over time—and in Carrithers' piece, several stories unfold—but that ongoing process of unfolding demonstrates that the possible meaning of the texts will continue to unfold endlessly, and so will their potential interventions.

In this sense, Carrithers takes history as an epistemological moment that passes (new epistemologies emerge afterward); so understanding comes from redescribing that historical moment, in detail, to try to get at how it made sense at that time. There can be no theoretical perspective that will achieve this in all times or all places—there can only be description and redescription. Carrithers, in caricaturing the conceptual positions taken at the time of the writing of the ethnographies with the style of his own presentation, makes the point with humor and rich irony that there is no single way of doing ethnography, both because of the reasons we try to do ethnography (to try to understand differences, which always presents us with the problem of recognizing them in terms other than our own), and because the imperative of self-scrutiny, which both Strathern and Graeber discuss from different vantage points, makes the rules of doing ethnography, and its possible subsequent meanings, mutually contradictory. The implication of Carrithers' article is that the fascination of ethnography is the knots, not the answers—not the ideas applied to understanding it, nor the ethnographic descriptions in themselves, but the effort to understand something otherwise.

Niko Besnier's comments introduce a different way to think about academic communication than that presented by Carrithers. Where Carrithers focuses on the world of academic expectations and rules, and the way anthropology sets itself up to make anthropology into an impossibility, Besnier draws attention to work done on the complexities and politics of communicative practices. In the course of this, Besnier points out some of the other entanglements in which ethnographic writing is embedded, both political and social. Drawing on Bakhtin and Herzfeld, he argues that many scholars over the last two decades have been working on this issue of how to cross the divide between the logic by which the ethnographer understands things and the logic by which the people studied do so, and that Bakhtin's idea of mutually constituted meaning is now widely used. On the matter of the politics of language and communication, Besnier draws attention to the highly politically inflected field in which people speak and write, and thus the considerably varied right to be heard that this involves. His contemporary reading of Carrithers' historical rendition comes from the vantage point of how to account for communication in a deeply politically entangled world, whereas my reading looks at the effect of Carrithers' deliberately ironic performance, which demonstrates how rapidly concepts shift in anthropology.

David Graeber, the only author to discuss direct action directly, as it were, also locates the debate in the world of academic rules, ideologies, and conventions that was the focus of Carrithers' intervention. However, Graeber pulls on a very different thread about anthropology to make a wider point: that the engagement between anthropology and the neoliberalized academy ended up, in his view, blunting the tools anthropology had to generate a critical position toward economic and political forces that are attempting to undermine the intellectual and structural autonomy of universities (*inter alia*). Just at the time when anthropologists most needed to be building a critical stance toward these transformations, Graeber suggests, the discipline instead had a moment of self-implosion which closely paralleled the aims of neoliberalism. Ethnographic self-scrutiny began to be replaced by audit-inspired self-scrutiny, which was, Graeber argues, combined with certain forms of postmodern theory to generate radical self-doubt. That moment of radical self-doubt was accompanied by a "hyperprofessionalization of the discipline." While noting that things did not need to go that way, in that earlier postmodernist-inspired theories did seem to hint toward quite a politically radical critique, in the end what happened was that the discipline turned inward, attacking itself, rather than drawing on ethnographic knowledge to deal with the contemporary political problems of the day. In his contribution, Martin draws this out a little further, combining the argument Gregory makes about posthumanism and Graeber's point about postmodern self-scrutiny in a world of intense academic audit, to suggest that the tendency to ascribe agency to things during that period might be at least in part an effect of the combined loss of power of academics in universities and their being subject to control by "things" such as auditing and bureaucratic procedures. It is little wonder, Martin concludes, that academics should find themselves suspecting that such things have magical powers.

While Graeber suggests that anthropologists themselves removed their ability to intervene, their capacity to act, he does concede that the conditions Martin describes might have been a contributing factor. Graeber clearly regards this hyperreflexive

turn as a response to being subjected to massive bureaucratic and economic re-structuring. Apparently, there was coauthorship here, an unholy alliance between anthropologists and those who torment them: "The reflexive impulse, taken in this context, can only become a profoundly bourgeois form of literary self-constitution which was at the very least continuous with the hyperprofessionalization of the discipline" (Graeber, this volume). In effect, his argument is that what anthropologists had done in the 1980s and 1990s was to transform an ethnographic form of self-scrutiny into a neoliberal one, and, through that, remove their key tool for critical intervention: what I have called an ethnographic focus.

Graeber argues that the way to develop a renewed means to intervene is through a "prefigurative" anthropology/politics, a kind of ethnographically and historically informed variation of anarchism. Here, the goal is not some kind of equality that is always in the future and needs to be rammed down people's unwilling throats in order to be achieved (which hints at the critiques against what happened during the Soviet period), but an approach which instead asks people to act today within the current means available as if things were already the way we would like them to be—to follow, in Graeber's words, "the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free."

Jane Cowan's response to Graeber's intervention adds yet another knot, from a quite different ethnographic and structural vantage point. While agreeing with Graeber that both a historical and ethnographic focus are important in understanding what the political implications of different ideas and concepts might be, she also strongly questions Graeber's assertion that anthropologists have imploded into themselves in the way that he suggests. In both historical and intellectual terms, she argues that this has not been the case. Instead, she suggests, both students and academic staff have persistently and consistently challenged changes within university structures when they have threatened academic freedom, and that, at least in her own experience at the University of Sussex, anthropologists have been at the forefront of these protests, in part precisely because of their ethnographic focus in understanding what is going on.

Moreover, while Cowan would not challenge the underlying ideals of Graeber's call for a "prefigurative" anthropology/politics, she does challenge his assertion that contemporary bureaucratic processes of universities are inherently and irredeemably ideologically neoliberal, that neoliberalism has won the ideological battle. What Graeber has left out, Cowan suggests, is the knots, the entanglements, double binds, and paradoxes that are thrown up by working within an organization as complex as a university. In particular, he has perhaps confused several techniques (self-scrutiny, bureaucratic procedures, and organization) with ideology (neoliberalism), as if they were one and the same thing. From the ethnographic vantage point of the Occupy movement, it is easy to see how that elision might occur; from the vantage point of working within the university, the different purposes to which self-scrutiny, as well as bureaucractic procedures, can be put become evident.

In order to demonstrate the entangled way in which bureaucratic procedures develop, Cowan provides a form of auto-ethnography (Strathern 1987) on the conditions in universities about which Graeber writes. She first situates herself historically by noting that both she and Graeber take a deeply historical approach toward anthropology in general, and that both have in the past explored the historical

moment in which Marcel Mauss was writing, in order to understand his contemporary entanglements. Whereas Graeber did this in order to revise anthropological arguments on value, debt, and exchange, Cowan did it in order to contextualize the intense political interwar years moment when the League of Nations, which had the task of mopping up after the First World War (again that war appears), was at its height. During that period (the 1920s), a slew of petitions and requests were made by endless groups to the League of Nations. Cowan comments: "I have been struck by the way this first institutionalization of the "international . . . was a project invested with diverse dreams, imaginations, and visions, from those of the most hard-nosed realpolitik statesmen to those of visionary socialists."

In other words, Cowan's research implies there was no single grand plan, let alone a coherent or singular ideology, in the League of Nations: people were making it up as they went along. Or if there was a grand plan, it was not very effectively carried out. One implication of this is that the neoliberal "bureaucratic machine" might also not be quite as coherent as it appears. In this context, Cowan ponders whether Graeber actually had any knots in his paper—any double binds or entanglements that led to self-contradiction or paradox, or unpredictable outcomes.

The more contemporary issue Cowan describes is her own recent experience with the University of Sussex, which echoes the conflicts currently going on in universities that Graeber outlines in his paper. Cowan first notes that at Sussex, it was not the university or the academic "system" that was being brutal, but the university's leadership (humans, not structures; cf. Martin's paper, this volume). Moreover, there were many university staff who were not sitting in their offices and pondering on their inability to say anything for fear of insufficient self-scrutiny, but actively protesting—and this prominently included a number of anthropologists.

Cowan's account depicts an intriguing knot, one that is probably familiar to many. She was elected to one of the few genuinely powerful governing positions left for academics in the university, on the University Council, her university's highest governing body. And as such, she has been directly involved in efforts to resist the logic of what Graeber discusses in his paper. Here, Cowan presents a double bind: in one sense, one could say from Graeber's perspective that Cowan has been coopted, in that she is a member of the governing body which oversees the enforcement of neoliberalism onto the university. On the other hand, she is doing precisely what Graeber's position implies all academics ought to be doing: combining their intellectual work with activist work. As the double-bind discussion above implies, there is no way to win at this game if you play by its rules, and Cowan quite explicitly describes how that worked in this case. So she agrees with Graeber that something must be done, and that a key component of that is to change the terms of the debate. But she disagrees that what needs to be done is to walk away from engaging with the bureaucratic procedures, structures, and organizational changes in universities: in a sense, universities are nothing but such procedures, so one key way to resist is surely to work toward changing them. Cowan suggests that efforts at doing this have been intense in many universities; and although this often does not attract the headlines (arguments in committee meetings and board rooms rarely make it to the front page), in her view, this is a crucial area where an ethnographic focus can make a difference in both maintaining and shaping the conditions of possibility for anthropology.

Conclusion

If there is one thing that exploring the questions posed by *Anthropological Knots* has established for me, it is that the current moment is a particularly important time to be having that conversation: there are powerful challenges to academic freedom palpably in existence, and, simultaneously, there is plenty of scope for anthropologists, in all their various guises, to make a contribution both to this situation and to a wider reframing of what might count as intervention. This special section is offered as an encouragement to continue the conversation, and, in particular, to embrace the messiness that an ethnographic focus generates, both in description and in interpretation. What is lost in the coherence or clarity of the message is gained in the way ethnography can offer constant, powerful engagement with thinking otherwise, in conditions that are inevitably knotty.

Acknowledgements

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Des nœuds anthropologiques: Conditions de possibilité et interventions

Résumé : Cet article expose la manière dont le débat sur les *Nœuds Anthropologiques* auquel les contributeurs de ce volume ont répondu a été présenté, et il propose d'autres pistes pour aborder les deux questions cruciales de ce débat: premièrement, qu'est-ce qui rend possible l'anthropologie à l'heure actuelle? Et deuxièmement, que peut-on appeler une intervention en termes anthropologiques? Cet article soutient qu'un point de vue ethnographique est essentiel comme élément de réponse à ces deux questions. Ce point de vue est conceptuellement - et

implicitement - comparatif, et il engendre la prémisse qu'il n'existe aucune forme de compréhension garantie, existant en tout lieu et en tout temps; mais il implique également que la diversité, aussi abondante et complexe soit-elle, n'est pas aléatoire. Il existe toujours des particularités qui font la différence, et qui ont des implications spécifiques pour toute intervention. Ainsi, si les *Nœuds Anthropologiques* créent un sentiment d'emmêlement infini, ce sont des enchevêtrements qui sont historiquement et culturellement spécifiques, à la fois au niveau des concepts et au niveau de la pratique.

Sarah GREEN is Professor of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Helsinki. She specializes particularly on issues of location and borders, which provide a means to analyze how people classify the world, their location in it as well as the location of others. She is interested in the political, social, economic, and historical dynamics involved in that process of defining the difference between here and somewhere else and then attempting to make it so. She is author of *Notes from the Balkans* (2005), *Urban Amazons* (1997), and joint author of *Borderwork* (2013) with Lena Malm (photography; additional contributions by Robin Harper and Markus Drake).

Sarah Green
University of Helsinki
Social and Cultural Anthropology
Department of Social Research
PL 18, Unioninkatu 35 (318)
FI-00014 University of Helsinki
Finland
sarah.green@helsinki.fi